

# WASHINGTON

*Keeping Track, Promoting Health*



*"CDC's National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network is the most important accomplishment of the past decade."*

**Thomas A. Burke, Ph.D., M.P.H.**

Associate Dean for Public Health Practice and Training  
Professor, Department of Health Policy and Management  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

For decades, the United States has faced a fundamental gap in understanding how environmental contaminants affect people's health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working to close this gap by improving surveillance through the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network). The Tracking Network is a dynamic Web-based tool that, for the first time, provides health and environment data in one easy to find location.

Policy makers and public health officials can use the Tracking Network to make critical decisions about where to target environmental public health resources and interventions. Health practitioners and researchers can use the Tracking Network to learn more about health conditions related to the environment, and improve treatment plans. Anyone can use the Tracking Network to find out how the environment may be affecting them, their family's or community's health.

The building blocks of the national network are state and local health departments around the country that are funded to build local tracking systems. These systems supply data to the National Tracking Network and address local environmental public health concerns. The tracking programs use their networks every day to improve the health of their communities.

## Why Tracking Matters in Washington

Lead poisoning and carbon monoxide exposure are important environmental public health concerns for Washington. Before the Tracking Program, the Washington Department of Health (DOH) did not have a Web site where people could search for information about these or other environmental concerns. Local and state health workers had access to a restricted, secure query system critical health data, but that system was outdated and quickly becoming more difficult to support. Today, because of the Washington Tracking Network, the Washington DOH offers a public website where users can sort, chart and map data for a growing number of environment health indicators. In addition, the system connects users to related resources. The Washington Tracking Network also has contributed to updating the agency's data query system for public health professionals. The new Community Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) uses cutting edge technology standards and improved functionality for analyzing health and population data. Washington DOH has been working to build these systems since 2002, when it began receiving funding from CDC as part of the Tracking Program. As the Washington Tracking Network continues building these and other Web-based tools, community members and public health officials will be better able to work in partnership using data to inform public health actions.



# TRACKING IN ACTION

	The Problem	Tracking in Action	Improved Public Health
<p><b>Preventing accidental carbon monoxide deaths</b></p>	<p>Accidental poisoning from carbon monoxide (CO) causes about five hundred deaths in the U.S. each year. In Washington, about 53 people go to the hospital for symptoms of CO poisoning every year. Many acute CO poisonings are from exposure to CO from fuel burning appliances, portable generators, or charcoal burners brought inside the home. A study of a CO poisoning outbreak in King County, during power outages in 2006, showed that 70% of people had been exposed to toxic levels of CO from generators or charcoal burners brought inside. In response to new state legislation, the Washington Building Code Council wrote draft rules in 2009 requiring the placement of CO alarms in homes. However, the draft rules applied only to homes with fuel-fired appliances or those with attached garages. As a result, many residents were still at a high risk for carbon monoxide poisoning.</p>	<p>Washington Tracking Network scientists led an agency-wide Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Planning Workgroup. This workgroup coordinated Washington Department of Health actions with the work of the Washington Building Code Council. Washington Tracking Network staff provided data from their network to decision makers for new rules. These data described Washington's burden of preventable deaths and sickness due to CO poisoning, and also the risks – such as indoor use of generators – that cause a large number of CO poisonings. This information helped policy-makers recognize the need to extend the building code rules to more types of homes.</p>	<p>The Washington Building Code Council approved a measure to extend the rule to many types of homes. Other organizations and health advocates successfully lobbied the state legislature for the CO poisoning prevention issue and created more awareness about the new rules. The Washington Department of Health and Washington Tracking Network provided the facts needed to help craft the rule's language. The Washington Building Code Council now requires all residential buildings in Washington to have carbon monoxide alarms by 2013. The new, stricter rules provide greater protection of public's health.</p>
<p><b>Helping communities connect air pollution control and improved health</b></p>	<p>For American Indians and Alaska Natives in Washington, asthma rates are much higher than the state average. These cases are also less likely to be well controlled. Reducing asthma triggers is a key step in preventing asthma attacks. Smoke can trigger an asthma attack and cause lung disease. Non-certified wood burning stoves are a major source of smoke in some communities. But persuading community leaders to address smoke from non-certified woodstoves can be very hard.</p>	<p>The Washington Tracking Network partnered with the Asthma Program at the Department of Health to find out where wood burning stoves—especially non-certified stoves—were being used. The data showed that wood burning was common in many communities. Scientists were most concerned about the high use of non-certified stoves in tribal communities where asthma rates were also high. They met with tribal leaders about wood stove use and explained how indoor and outdoor smoke from wood stoves can trigger problems for people with asthma.</p>	<p>After seeing the data about wood stove use and how wood smoke can trigger asthma, tribal leaders mobilized and motivated stakeholders around their action plan for managing smoke in their communities.</p>
<p><b>Improved public health surveillance and action for lead</b></p>	<p>An outdated, paper-based system made lead test reporting inefficient in Washington. State and local health agencies also had no secure, electronic environment to share information about lead poisoning investigations. Using fax machines, paper and phones made ensuring the privacy of lab reports difficult and led to delays in case follow-up.</p>	<p>The Washington Tracking Network improved the flow of environmental public health data by helping to build Washington's electronic lab reporting system: Public Health Reporting of Electronic Data (PHRED). PHRED makes it easier to handle public health reports like blood lead testing. Once agency workers receive data from PHRED, they can transfer reports of concern into the Public Health Issues Management System (PHIMS). Within hours, local health officials can access PHIMS and carry out their investigations.</p>	<p>Systems like PHRED and PHIMS make public health surveillance and response faster. Labs can now report electronic lead poisoning test results more efficiently and securely. The state Child Blood Lead Registry receives more standardized and complete test results. Local public health officials now are alerted quickly to possible lead poisoning cases, cutting delays and saving costs during case investigations. PHIMS provides state and local health agencies an easy, secure way to communicate about ongoing investigations, also providing technical assistance more quickly, maintaining privacy, and improving public health response and prevention.</p>